

Baptism in the Great Commission



Part 1 of 3

By Dallas Burdette: February 24, 1998

Thrust Statement: Baptism is from heaven, not men.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:18-20

Following the resurrection of our Lord Jesus, He instructed His disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). In this command, Jesus instructed the disciples to do two things: (1) "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (v.19) and (2) "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (v. 20). Mark also records the commission this way: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16). Baptism is associated with belief.

Baptism plays a very important role in the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, Matthew begins the ministry of John the Baptist with baptism (3:1-12). Immediately following John's call for repentance and baptism, Matthew records the baptism of Jesus (3:13-17). Matthew not only begins his Gospel with the baptism of John, but he also concludes his book with Jesus' command to His disciples to baptize. Since Matthew begins and ends his book with baptism, then, it must have played a very important part in the ministry of John and of Jesus.

Can one accept or reject Christian baptism at will? Is baptism essential for salvation? Is baptism from heaven or from men? If it is from heaven, Can one refuse baptism and still be saved? Is rejection of baptism a rejection of God's counsel? Is baptism a sign of God's grace? These are questions that I encourage each of you to reflect upon in your decision to follow Christ. During the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry, He questioned the chief priest and the elders of the people about John's baptism. Matthew records the following

conversation between Jesus and the religious leaders:

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. "By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" (Matthew 21:23-25).

It is obvious that John's baptism came from heaven, not from men. For one to cast-off baptism—God's heavenly design for the believer—is to discard the counsel of God. Luke summarizes this rejection when he writes:

All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. **But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John** (Luke 7:29-30).

When the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected baptism, they rejected God's purpose for themselves. When you renounce Christian baptism, you, too, are declining to consider God's purpose for yourself. One might also ask the question: Is Christ's baptism from heaven or from men? If it is from heaven, and it is, then, why not acknowledge that God's way is right and be baptized?

In the Great Commission, as cited above, Jesus commanded His disciple to baptize believers into the name of the trinity (Matthew 28:18-20). Just a perusal of the books of the New Testament reveals the role that baptism plays in the conversion of thousands in their response to Jesus as Lord. Luke, in the book of Acts, narrates a significant number of baptisms in the early phases of the Christian church. Were the baptizers acting on the command of Jesus? Could baptism be rejected or accepted just on the whims of the people? Was baptism from heaven or from men? Some citations from the book of Acts should shed some light on the attitude of the first century church as to the importance of this Christian institution.

The Day of Pentecost

For example, on the day of Pentecost, Luke informs us that Peter replied to the penitent, "Repent and **be baptized**, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Luke further states: "Those who accepted his message **were baptized**, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (2:41). Did Peter tell them to do what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission? On that day, Peter "warned them" and he "pleaded with them" to save themselves "from this corrupt generation" (v.40). Did any respond? Yes! As stated above, "Those who accepted his message were baptized." Do you want to save yourself? Then, why not do what they did? They gladly accepted the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus and were baptized the same day (v.41).

The People of Samaria

Luke also records the preaching of Philip in Samaria and the response of the people: "But **when they believed** Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they **were baptized**, both men and women" (8:12). Luke mentions one of the Samaritans by name—Simon (v.13). In fact, he says, "Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw (v.13).

The Ethiopian Eunuch

In Acts 9:26-39, Luke records the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. After the preaching of Philip, the evangelist, the eunuch requested baptism (v.36). How did the eunuch know about baptism? Did Philip tell him about this during the course of the conversation? Was baptism essential for his obedience? Was the eunuch baptized? What does the record say? Listen to the following remarks by Philip and the eunuch:

As they traveled along the road, they **came to some water** and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. **Why shouldn't I be baptized?**" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and **Philip baptized him**. When they **came up out of the water**, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing (vv.36-39).

Saul of Tarsus

One of the most notorious persecutors of the Christian church was Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9). Following his encounter with the Lord Jesus, he continued his journey to Damascus. Following his three-day blindness (v. 9), God sends Ananias (v. 10) to restore his sight and to allow Paul to be filled with the Holy Spirit (v.17). Immediately following the restoration of his eyesight, Luke says that "He got up and **was baptized**" (v.19). Why did Ananias tell him to be baptized? Was it because the Lord had commanded him to be baptized? If he had refused baptism, would he have rejected the counsel of God? Have you yourself rejected the counsel of God by not being baptized as a believer?

Cornelius the Centurion

Luke also records another case of conversion that involved the command of baptism—Cornelius the centurion (chapter 10). After the appearance of an angel in a vision, Cornelius was instructed to send for Simon Peter (v.5). When Cornelius sends for Peter, Peter responds to the call and leaves the next day for Caesarea (v.22). Upon Peter's arrival, he begins to speak:

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around

doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that **everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (10:34-43).**

Peter associates "forgiveness of sins" with belief in Jesus (v. 43). During Peter's speaking, Luke says, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message (v.44). Then, Luke records the astonishment of those who had accompanied Peter to the house of Cornelius: "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God" (vv. 45-46). Did they receive "forgiveness of sins" when they believed on the name of the Lord? Did they receive the "Holy Spirit" before baptism? Were they the children of Hell when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them? Did God pour out His Spirit upon children of the Devil? Did this phenomenon exempt them from Christian baptism commanded by our Lord? The answer is no! "Then Peter said, 'Can anyone keep these people from **being baptized** with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.' So he ordered that they **be baptized** in the name of Jesus Christ" (vv. 47-48). Is this not what our Lord told them to do in the Great Commission?

Lydia's Conversion in Philippi

Luke, in his narration of Paul's second missionary journey, tells about the conversion of Lydia and her household (16:11-15). Upon their (Paul, Luke, and his companions) arrival in Philippi, a Roman colony (v. 12), they inquired about worshipers of the one true God. In their investigation, they discovered that a group of women were outside "the city gate to the river" (v.13). Luke writes,

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. **When she and the members of her household were baptized**, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us (vv.13-15).

Conversion of the Philippian Jailer

Once when Paul, Luke, and his companions "were going to the place of prayer" (Acts

16:16), they were met by a "slave girl who had a spirit" (**v.16**). As a result of the slave girl following them for several days, "Paul," says Luke, "became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!'" At that moment the spirit left her" (**v.18**). As a result of this exorcism, the owners of the slave girl seized Paul and Silas and "dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities" (**v. 19**). This resulted in their imprisonment and the stripping of their clothes followed by a beating (**vv.22-23**). Ultimately, an angel of God interfered with a "violent earthquake" (**v. 26**) that shook the very foundations of the prison (**v.26**). This resulted in the opening of the prison doors and the chains opening up that bound the prisoners (**vv.26-27**). Luke says,

The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. **He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"** They replied, **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."** Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. **At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.** The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family (**vv.27-34**).

How soon before they were baptized? Was it two weeks later? Was it a month later? Did they wait until several responded to the good news of God before baptism? If baptism is so unimportant, as advocated by many Christians, then, why were they baptized "immediately" in the same 'hour of the night'? Does this sound ridiculous? Why the same hour of the night? Does this baptism remind one of the commands of Jesus in **Matthew 28:18-20**?

Baptisms in Corinth

Following their release from prison, Paul and Silas traveled to **Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9)**, then, to Berea (**vv.10-15**), next, to Athens (**vv.16-33**), and, finally, Paul arrives in Corinth (**18:1**). During Paul's stay in Corinth, Luke writes, "Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (**v.4**). As a result of his proclaiming the good news of God's kingdom, Paul baptized Crispus and many of the Corinthians: "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized" (**v.8**).

Apollos and John's Baptism

Apollos was a learned man and a man "with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" (**Acts 18:24**). Even though, in the words of Luke, "He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John" (**v.25**), he still did not understand the baptism of the Great Commission. As a result of this lack of proper understanding of Christian baptism, Priscilla and Aquila invited Apollos "to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately" (**v.26**). This is

given as an introduction leading up to Paul's engagement with certain ["about twelve men in all"—[19:7](#)] Christians in Ephesians who knew only the baptism of John ([1-7](#)). Since they had not been baptized "into the name of the Lord Jesus" ([v.5](#)), they were baptized again: "Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus" (vv.4-5). If baptism is nonessential, then, why were they baptized again? Is it because of the command of Jesus in [Matthew 28:18-20](#)?—"baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" ([v.19](#)).

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March 1, 1998

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